DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 200 RC 024 045

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TITLE	The Montana Behavioral Initiative: Student Results and System Outcomes.
PUB DATE	2003-03-00
NOTE	7p.; In: Rural Survival. Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (23rd, Salt Lake City, UT, March 20-22, 2003); see RC 024 044.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Agency Cooperation; *Behavior Problems; *Community Involvement; Discipline; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Parent Participation; *Professional Development; School Community Relationship; *School Culture; Staff Development; Student Behavior; *Student School Relationship; Summer Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Montana

ABSTRACT

The Montana Behavioral Initiative (MBI) was developed in 1995 in response to increased incidents of student behavior problems. The intent of MBI is to improve educational environments to meet the needs of all students, including those with behavioral challenges. Each participating school conducts needs assessments and develops site-specific goals and strategies. Support is provided by an annual summer institute for staff development, MBI facilitators and consultants, an MBI council, and a state coordinator. A program evaluation conducted structured interviews and focus groups at five MBI schools at three levels of program adoption: established, emerging, and new. Recommendations include clearly distinguishing the MBI philosophy and process; tailoring future summer-institute content to areas of need identified from experienced sites; developing assessment practices that identify easily-tracked behavioral and academic measures; identifying computerized data entry and analysis programs that support MBI indicators more directly; providing mentoring support for new MBI sites; developing incentives to encourage stronger school-community linkages in MBI sites; creating a central listing of research-based practices and programs; clearly delineating criteria for recognizing approved MBI sites and facilitators; integrating MBI youth events into professional development venues; developing professional development sessions specifically for high school athletic coaches; and communicating MBI philosophy and process to a broader organizational and policy environment. (TD)

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THE MONTANA BEHAVIORAL INITIATIVE: STUDENT RESULTS AND SYSTEM OUTCOMES

The Montana Behavioral Initiative (MBI) was developed in 1995 in an effort to build safe school environments in Montana's public schools through school-community collaboration and direct student instruction to teach responsibility and respect (Fishbaugh & Furshong, 1998). The initial elements of the MBI process were extensions of existing programs in elementary, middle, and high school programs through a strategically focused effort to promote organized team approaches and school responsibility plans to create safe, civil, and achieving environments. In the initial year of MBI implementation, 5 community/school partnerships representing 9 individual schools were selected to become model MBI sites. From this modest beginning, the number of participating MBI sites has expanded annually from the initial 5 to its present configuration of 119 school/community sites. The total of participating schools has risen from the initial collection of 9 to 167 in the 2001-2002 school year. Table 1 provides a summary of the progressive development of participating sites and schools in the MBI process.

Table 1
Montana Behavioral Initiative: Number of Participating Sites and Schools

School Year:	Number of Sites	Number of Schools
1995-1996	5	9
1996-1997	5	32
1997-1998	19	65
1998-1999	44	90
1999-2000	77	123
2000-2001	98	146
2001-2002	119	167

The Montana Behavioral Initiative is supported through the efforts of the Montana Office of Public Instruction, in cooperation with local school districts across the state. Representatives from both state and local education agencies have been engaged in strategic planning processes to identify the mission and goals of the initiative. The current mission statement states that: "The Montana Behavioral Initiative (MBI) assists educators, parents, and other community members in developing the attitudes, skills, and systems necessary to ensure that each student, regardless of ability or disability, leaves public education and enters the community with social and academic competence" (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2002). The term initiative refers to proactive efforts by community process designed to meet students' diverse and complex social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. The goals that have been adopted to achieve the MBI mission include the following:

1. To increase the awareness and understanding of effective schools practices.
2. To increase and improve the use of team processes in educational decision-making and in addressing issues concerning our youth.
3. To support the implementation of best practices procedures in Montana's schools, foster beliefs which hold that all children are valued, and that positive and proactive approaches to problems produce the most satisfying results.
4. To increase awareness regarding the value and use of data-based decision-making in education.
5. To foster the belief that the education of today's youth is a community responsibility.

The rationale for creating the MBI process was in response to increased incidents of insubordination, alienation, aggressive behavior, truancy, drug use, drop out rates, and vandalism among Montana youth. The founders of the initiative envisioned a partnership among school personnel, students, parents, and public officials to share in addressing these concerns by developing a positive school culture that included characteristics of personal responsibility, social responsibility, and productive community participation. Over the past seven years of

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MBI implementation, a set of beliefs statements have been developed that provide the philosophical orientation to these efforts. The MBI beliefs statements (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2002) include the following:

1. All students should be taught all the skills necessary for success including academic, social, emotional, and behavioral.
2. Schools are places where students can learn and practice positive interpersonal, cross-cultural, and citizenship skills.
3. A caring school climate and positive relationships between students and staff are critical to student success and provide an environment where academic flourish.
4. Schools are places where youth have access to many significant adults to help them feel collectively and individually valued.
5. Schools and communities must work together to meet the diverse needs of students and honor the traditions and contributions of both family and community members.
6. All students are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect.
7. Successful schools gather and use a variety of information to improve teaching and learning.
8. Effective use of a team approach involving all school staff working together provides a consistency that enhances student success.
9. Positive, proactive and preventative efforts of schools and communities an create a school climate free of stereotyping, harassment, hatred and violence—filled with a concern for justice and fairness.

Theoretical Basis

The Montana Behavioral Initiative is based on the Iowa Behavioral Initiative and the effective schools research summarized by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Cotton, 1999). These research-based frameworks provide a focus on attitudes, skills, and systems that lead to student success and positive school cultures. Schools that promote effective attitudes have unconditional positive regard for students, maintain a positive and proactive focus, assert beliefs of responsibility and self-efficacy, and affirm high, success-oriented student expectations. Schools that develop effective skills match instruction and services to individual student needs, employ proactive curricula, use validated instructional strategies, and provide systematic data-based interventions. Schools that emphasize effective systems are supported by strong leaders, provide an array of services, engage parents, collaborate with community agency and service providers, employ school-wide approaches involving both general and special educators, engage in systematic staff development for school improvement, conduct ongoing program evaluation, and have a clearly defined vision for improvement.

The framework for MBI interventions is based on a foundations approach of establishing positive discipline policies and responsibility curriculum (Sprick, 1998; Sprick, Garrison, & Howard 1992). The foundational approach is employed as the basis for site development of discipline policy and strategies. Detailed needs assessments that are conducted with students, staff, and parents provide the focus on interventions related to school safety, faculty-to-student interaction, and student-to-student interaction. Each participating school is charged to develop site-specific goals and strategies for goal attainment. Additional resources and approaches to support the basic framework are provided through an annual statewide staff development activity known as the Montana Behavioral Initiative Summer Institute. This national recognized professional development institute attracts more than a thousand Montana educators and teams who are educated in best practices and develop opportunities for networking with community partners. In addition to the Summer Institute, the MBI process is systematically supported through additional components. Each component with a brief description of intended purposes that include the following:

1. MBI Facilitators
    a. Participate in professional development training, enhancing facilitator and team leadership skills
    b. Help sites develop an understanding of the MBI process
    c. Organize an MBI team to identify and address site-based concerns
    d. Guide sites through the MBI process
    e. Extend knowledge of best practices and validated educational strategies
    f. Assist in the development of community involvement
    g. Network with educators and community members statewide
2. MBI Council
    a. Oversees the development of MBI practices and principles
    b. Links with the MBI State Coordinator and the other components of the MBI process
    c. Meets regularly for sharing, communicating, and strategic planning
    d. Coordinates efforts to impact statewide policies, guidelines, or structures which will promote the mission and goals of MBI
3. MBI Consultants

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a. Develop and provide technical assistance, training, and support services
b. Support site teams in their understanding and implementation of MBI goals
c. Serve on the MBI Council
d. Participate in focused training, joint problem-solving and coordinated efforts to promote the mission and goals of MBI

4. MBI State Coordinator
   a. Links the MBI components together
   b. Coordinates professional development training
   c. Networks with other state and local agencies
   d. Develops materials for use by consultants, facilitators, and Council
   e. Assists in planning MBI Summer Institute

Though the efforts of the personnel who comprise these four components that provide direction and management support for the statewide MBI process, additional support functions are offered to enhance success. These support functions include information sharing, interagency/community cooperation, and evaluation. Information sharing is accomplished through workshops, conference presentations, listserv participation, web site information, brochures, site visitations, and presentations. Interagency/community cooperation is accomplished through community and statewide agencies that support MBI by working with schools to strengthen policy and procedures to facilitate effective and efficient services for youth, coordinating community-based services with schools, and encouraging change that enable schools and communities to provide quality services to youth. Evaluation is completed through the contracted services of a program evaluator that analyzes statewide implications of MBI, provides for ongoing decision-making and management activities, and facilitates data-driven decision-making management.

The MBI interventions provide a process and content that assist organizations to improve school climate and classroom environments to meet the needs of all students, including those with behavioral challenges. The term initiative refers to proactive efforts by schools to identify priority concerns involving school safety and to teach alternative acceptable behaviors. Five key indicators that characterize the MBI process in action include MBI training, MBI team process, evaluation process, community process, and proactive support systems approach using best practices. The Montana Behavioral Initiative Blueprint for Implementation (2001) summarizes these key concepts and provides examples of indicators that supply evidence of recognition as a Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) approved MBI site. The five key indicators that provide the innovation configuration for the initiative are defined as follows:

(1) MBI Training is an ongoing program of professional development for MBI building level and district level staff, including MBI organized teams, for the purpose of increasing awareness and understanding of effective school practices.
(2) MBI Team Process is a systematic professional development approach provided to school-based teams of educators for the purpose of increasing and improving the use of team processes in educational decision-making to address issues concerning Montana's youth. This ongoing process is achieved through a focus on administrative commitment to the MBI process, site-specific goals and implementation strategies, and team building activities.
(3) Evaluation Process consists of prescribed and optional evaluation tasks that are developed to increase awareness regarding the value and use of data-based decision-making in education.
(4) Community Process is a set of strategies designed to achieve community involvement to foster the belief that the education of today's youth is a community responsibility.
(5) Proactive Support Systems Approach Using Best Practices are defined as practices at multiple levels of impact including school-wide, classroom based, non-classroom based, individual student, and family in support the implementation of best practices procedures in Montana's schools. The intent of these practices is to foster beliefs which hold that all children are valued, and that positive and proactive approaches to problems produce the most satisfying results.

The philosophy of MBI is aimed at creating safe, civil, and productive schools. The guiding considerations behind the program are designed to empower individual schools to create their own unique approach to implementation of the MBI content and process. Individual site-based teams determine site needs, make program decisions, and evaluate results based on the systematic collection of data. These teams develop strategies and select procedures appropriate to the individual schools. The MBI process is not a program, which means that implementation activities will vary according to the needs of individual schools.

Rationale

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The Montana Office of Public Instruction has introduced, supported, and sustained the MBI comprehensive staff development process since 1994 with the goal of facilitating school system and attitudinal changes that address the complex needs of Montana students in the state's system of public education. The underlying intent of MBI is to provide a process and content that assist organizations to improve school climate and classroom environments to meet the needs of all students, including those with behavioral challenges. A collection of anecdotal evidence exists that supports the effectiveness of the MBI interventions, however no systematic evaluation studies have been completed that document the impact of MBI at the student, school, school district, and community levels of influence.

The purpose of this investigation was to conduct a systematic evaluation of impact in selected schools that have adopted the MBI content-based staff development philosophy and process. The specific questions that were developed to inform this purpose included the following: (a) What are the operational definitions of the five key indicators that represent the MBI content and process? (b) What are the specific elements of content and process that are being used by participating MBI teams and schools? (c) What evidence of short-term and long-term impact of the MBI process has been documented at participating schools? (d) What are the research-based and validated best practices that have been implemented and documented at MBI schools? (e) What other contextual factors influence the outcomes that have been achieved at MBI schools and classrooms? (f) What specific recommendations regarding the effectiveness and potential improvement of the MBI process can be identified? (g) What recommendations can be identified for future enhancement and impact dissemination of MBI?

Method

A set of structured interview questions was developed to solicit information from MBI school settings representing three distinct developmental levels of adoption of the MBI innovation (Heifietz, 1994; Chrislip & Larson, 1994) including established, emerging, and new. All three levels of MBI schools had made commitments to incorporate the mission, principles, and goals of the Montana Behavioral Initiative into the school for the purpose of ensuring a positive school environment. Each MBI school submitted a Document of Participation indicating agreement with the five MBI indicators, completion of the MBI environmental blueprint, commitment to participate in the annual MBI summer institute, and designation of one team member to serve as MBI facilitator and complete the MBI facilitator training. Based on these criteria, staff from the Office of Public Instruction identified five representative schools from each of the outcome groups to provide responses to selected questions. The schools in each of the three MBI school designations (established, emerging, new) represented a variety of settings and student demographics.

The approach to the study was based on a case study methodology (Creswell, 1998; Berg, 2001), that explored detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. The Montana Behavioral Initiative represents a bounded system, with the elements of the MBI "case" comprised of events, activities, and individuals that provide the context for the investigation. Additional interpretative information obtained through the focus group process has been included to extend the analysis of outcomes and results attained through the MBI interventions. Finally, a summary of various artifacts that were collected throughout the course of the evaluation process has been provided. Selected samples of these artifacts are included as part of the evaluation documentation.

Findings and Recommendations

In reviewing all sources of data that were collected and summarized in support of MBI processes, a variety of recommendations were formulated to build on the success of the initiative. The following recommendations for improvement are offered without consideration of relative importance or priority:

(1) Future efforts to promote and publicize the components of MBI should clearly distinguish the elements of MBI philosophy (as articulated through the MBI beliefs statements) and MBI process (as described in the MBI Blueprint for Implementation. These distinctions are clear to educators who are knowledgeable about MBI, but not as clear to the uninitiated.

(2) To build on the success of the excellent MBI Summer Institute, it is recommended that established MBI school sites be interviewed to determine the content of future advanced strands that are offered at the Institute. Several educators expressed a desire to tailor the content of future sessions to identified areas of need from experienced sites.

(3) The evaluation process to determine the success of MBI schools was primarily concerned with survey information and rough measures of student behavior/responsibility. It is recommended that a template

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of potential assessment practices be developed for MBI school sites that identify integrated behavioral and academic measures that are easy to track.

(4) To address the difficulties involved in collection and summarization of evaluation data, it is recommended that computerized data entry and analysis programs be identified that would support the evaluation process key indicators of MBI more directly. The Safe Schools Inventory is but one example of this type of process.

(5) It is recommended that some type of formalized mentoring support for new MBI school sites be developed to ensure a smooth process of implementing the MBI process. Established school stakeholders could be identified as MBI coaches to address implementation questions and provide support based on successful experiences.

(6) Since the community process key indicator was consistently identified as the weakest link in the MBI process, it is recommended that some type of incentive program be developed to encourage stronger school/community linkages in MBI sites. A grant proposal process tied to resources from the education and business communities would be one possibility to promote model sites of MBI initiated school/community partnerships.

(7) To assist school sites in selecting promising research-based strategies, curricula, and programs that support their individual goals, it is recommended that a central listing of research-based practices and programs be compiled with a cross-reference to those MBI sites that are or have been using them.

(8) The criteria that are identified for recognizing a school site as an approved MBI setting should be clearly delineated. At the present time, there is great variability among the various school settings that are considered to be MBI school sites. Some are sites in name only, while the vast majority of school sites address the process and philosophy of MBI with distinction.

(9) In like measure, the criteria for recognizing and "anointing" education staff members as MBI facilitators need to be more clearly delineated. Several educators who were designated as MBI facilitators expressed discomfort that they had not received the necessary background and preparation to be successful in this role, frequently because they had not been able to complete the available training program for facilitators.

(10) The promotion of MBI youth oriented events that have recently been initiated through the sponsorship of the Office of Public Instruction, should be integrated into the long standing professional development venues sponsored for MBI staff members. For example, the MBI Youth Day and MBI Forum should be directly integrated into the MBI Summer Institute and MBI facilitator training process. This is particularly valuable for high schools that are considering adoption of the MBI process, since student leadership was identified as the most critical component to success in the high school setting.

(11) A focused set of professional development sessions that is specifically targeted at high school athletic coaches should be offered at the MBI Summer Institute and/or regional MBI training events. The potential influence that can be exerted from this group of educational stakeholders on the success of the MBI process was frequently mentioned as a desirable practice by a large majority of current MBI stakeholders.

(12) The leadership of the MBI State Advisory Council should extend the influence and messages of MBI philosophy and process to a broader organizational and policy environment. Some logical targets for consideration include the School Boards Association, Legislative Council, Inter-agency Coordinating Council for State Agencies, Montana School Administrators Associations, and Montana Education Association. The positive results and outcomes that are being achieved through the MBI process and philosophy can serve as a catalyst for collaborative partnerships and systems change.

(13) Additional research concerning the efficacy of MBI should be undertaken to consider long-term measures of program impact including graduation rates, school dropouts, and employment status of graduates.

(14) A follow-up investigation to the present study is recommended through a pre-test/post-test comparison design to determine the effects of the MBI philosophy and process on participating school sites over time. Part of this investigation could be designed to consider measures of the extent to which validated best practices are being implemented, the consistency with which behavior management policies and procedures are implemented, and whether teachers effectively use the identified interventions with targeted at-risk students.

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Title: American Council on Rural Special Education
2003 Conference Proceedings
Rural Survival
March 20-22, 2003; Salt Lake City, Utah

Author: Multiple - Editor: Ronda Menlove

Corporate Source: American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES)

Publication Date: March 2003

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